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Memcon: James G. Blight, Executive Director, Center for Science and Technology, Kennedy School, Harvard, August 26, 1987.

1. Rusk revealed in a letter to Blight in March, 1987 (to be revealed this Sunday in the times by Tony Lukas) that JFK had told him to prepare to have U Thant ask the US and Soviets to resolve the Cuban Missile Crisis by dismantling both the Cuban and the Turkish missiles: i.e., on the basis of "K's" letter of Saturday morning, 27 October, 1962.

I put the authorship of this letter in quotes, because many analysts have guessed--and the Excomm at the time judged--that it reflected a Politburo drafting, probably not by Khrushchev at all, overruling the much softer proposal implied in a letter of Friday night, 26 October, and spelled out in the Fomin-Scali conversations of Friday night. Given the tone of the Khrushchev letter, which suggested personal drafting by him, and the apparent authenticity of the Fomin representations, this suggested that as of Friday night (Saturday morning in Moscow) Khrushchev himself was ready to end the crisis on the basis of a US victory: ready to back down. (Only the JCS, the Miami Cubans and the parts of the CIA working with them would have seen a no-invasion pledge as compromising or negating a US victory: as they did in the event, Sunday and after).

But the Saturday letter, apparently countermanding the Friday night message on the basis of a corporate (sic) Kremlin decision, and public instead of private (constituting a position from which it would be hard to back down without great loss of prestige: as Khrushchev did suffer, apparently in the Kremlin itself), and accompanied by "Khrushchev's" decision to shoot down a U-2, seemed to confirm the hard line K had followed since the oncoming Soviet ships had stopped at the blockade line.

The transcript of the meetings of the Excomm on 27 October, transcribed by McGeorge Bundy in 1985, have now become available, cleared by the NSC. (Edited by Bundy? No one has any way to know. By the NSC?) (They will appear in the December issue of International Security). They reveal that Llewellyn Thompson--of great influence on the President--is the one who finally convinced the President that RFK's "ploy" might work, and was worth trying.

JFK was dubious that he could reply to the earlier letter, ignoring the later, tougher offer; after all, he said, the latter letter of that morning, the 27th, was public. "No, Mr. President, you're wrong," Thompson said, using almost unprecedented words. "This" (the letter of the 26th) is his offer," meaning that the previous one was Khrushchev's personal view.

That may have been true, but there was nothing to indicate,

on Saturday, that it was still the Soviets' effective offer, and there was the shootdown to indicate otherwise. If Khrushchev personally wanted to deal on Kennedy's terms, why risk starting an exchange of gunfire? Indeed, Herb Dinerstein speculates that "When the brinksmen realized, either from K's response to Russell or from K's private letter to Kennedy or from both, that their preferred strategy was to be abandoned for a retreat, they tried to save their policy by what the Soviet language would term a provocation--the shooting down of the U-2...Although we cannot say that the armed forces in this case tried to frustrate a concession by the Soviet Union on the missiles in Cuba, it was in character for the losers in the Soviet Union to stage a provocation to win a victory for their policy."

I am unaware of speculation elsewhere that the shootdown might not have been deliberately ordered by Khrushchev, or a result of a policy approved by him. Moreover, there is almost a total absence of speculation as to Khrushchev's motives in ordering it or permitting the shootdown; how it fitted into his strategy and expectations, how it related to the two letters, what response he anticipated.

The 27 October transcript now reveals, according to Blight, that no one raised the possibility, in any form, in the discussion in the ExComm on Saturday afternoon, after it was confirmed that the plane had been shot down and that the pilot was dead. Not only was it assumed with any question being raised that this was a Soviet action, it was likewise assumed that the decision had been made by Khrushchev himself.

As U. Alexis Johnson put it: "This is significant. These are Russians. They must want war!"

Throughout the crisis, and after, those who thought that there were few risks in taking a hard line and even knocking out the missiles with or without warning, based their confidence on the judgment that the Soviets must back down, eventually, because they were outgunned in the local area and confronted with overwhelmingly superior strategic nuclear force.

A problem with that view was that the Russians could make counterthreats elsewhere, in Berlin or Turkey, where their local superiority was just as great as the US enjoyed in the Caribbean (and, in the case of Turkey, with what seemed equivalent moral/legal arguments, except for "stealthy deployment"). The hawks thought that the probability of such challenge elsewhere was negligible, for the reason that they thought it could be easily countered by US first-use nuclear threats; to be sure, these too could be answered by Soviet tactical nuclear capabilities as large as the US (larger, in terms of MRBMs/IRBMs against Europe); but then, these would confront "overwhelming superiority."

Those who did not find US superiority overwhelming, in practical terms--e.g. Rusk, McNamara, Bundy, and probably the

President--did not agree that the Soviets would be deterred by responding to an attack on Cuba by a challenge elsewhere, one they were not at all anxious to have to confront. (The shootdown of the U-2, if ordered by Khrushchev as all agreed, would seem strongly to confirm this view of strong Soviet nerves and willingness to raise the risks and stakes.) Rusk says, according to Blight: "I would have given you a 99% probability that whatever we did, the Soviets would move on Berlin." He even went on to say, "I'll carry to my grave the question: Why didn't they?" (!)

(Nearly all present believed that the issue of the crisis was Berlin; "the crisis was about Berlin." Rusk was one of those who believed that US nuclear superiority "made no difference," so their advantage in the vicinity of Berlin was the same as ours in Cuba; he could see no reason why they would not be willing to confront us there as we were in Cuba.))

But the certainty by all that Khrushchev was responsible for the shootdown derives, I'm sure, from two premises that were unquestioned by either hawks or doves:

(a) In the words of Nitze, "The Soviets are responsible." (Nitze's line of analysis of the Soviets, from the 1950 NSC-68 to the present, is that they coldly calculate the "correlation of forces," and are prepared to back off if confronted by determination and superior forces. This is likewise Nixon's view, and that of many who feel they learned it from the Missile Crisis itself).

As Blight said, those interviewed who made this point almost all accompanied by saying, by way of contrast, "The Soviets are not like the Ayatollah Khomeini, or Khadafy." The 1962 version of the Mad Satan, of course, was Castro. But all week Khrushchev had been assuring Kennedy, in private letters, not to worry about the flakey Castro: the missiles (and SAMS?) were in Soviet hands.

b) The Soviets were obsessed with centralized control. Soviet nuclear warheads were controlled by special units of the KGB; they never let the warheads out of Soviet territory (in those days), even in the Bloc (?): certainly they never sent them out of Warsaw Pact territory. In other words, they had a much healthier concern for the control of weapons than we did; compounded by their fear of coups, distrust of allies, and above all, their basic principle of secrecy and extreme centralization of authority. Thus Khrushchev's assurances were very plausible, and were not, in fact, questioned at all.

Indeed, it was just because of this known prudent, conservative attitude toward nuclear weapons that rumors of deployment to Cuba were initially discounted so totally by CIA analysts; it was not only outside their past behavior, it seemed totally out of character to take a risk of losing control of nuclear weapons by deployment so far from major Soviet forces, in the country of an ally so loosely controlled and apparently impulsive as Castro.

As a matter of fact, Khrushchev did send major Soviet ground units to guard the offensive missiles; but not, apparently, the SAMs, which were shortly ((or possibly, from the beginning?! Is this definitely known, yet? Check it out)) to be controlled by Cubans anyway. (Dinerstein writing in 1976 says: "It is not known whether the Soviet SAM's were first ready only 27 October or whether they were operational long before..." P. 229). Either way, how were they guarded? Presumably Soviet trainers, at least, were in control, "administratively," till the 27th. But Cuban crews were apparently being readied throughout; were they actually manning the weapons? Was Soviet "control" the same as US "control" of nuclear weapons assigned to German air crews? (See Steinbrunner).

Nevertheless, McNamara (Sloan tapes) reveals that he was continuously concerned that a US airstrike on the missiles would lead a local "2d lieutenant" to feel it was his duty to fire off one missile. Even if Sorensen's/JFK's policy of retaliating to such a single weapon by "a full retaliatory strike on the Soviet Union" was not followed (which, I suppose, would indeed have raised thoughts of a coup in some quarters) McNamara found that prospect horrendous, unbearable. (He remained forever after convinced, he explained to Blight, that it did not take 1000 missiles to be deterrent; we--he, and not only he--had been deterred by the 10th-rate, minimal force on Cuba. It didn't take 400, as he suggests in his book; maybe 20 or 30, or the assurance of one warhead.)

But given this preoccupation with the (realistic) possibility that one or more Soviet missiles might escape from Khrushchev's control under non-nuclear air attack, it is striking that it did not occur to him, or anyone else, that SAMs that were known to be scheduled eventually for Cuban control, and for whose use Castro had been screaming for days publicly, might have slipped from Soviet control! Or even short of that (as Dinerstein suggests, and McNamara's fears also indicated) from Khrushchev's control, even though still in Soviet hands.

As I pointed out to Blight, conjectures and questions like this are absolutely routine, in crises and out. In fact, that very morning, the "accidental straying" of a SAC weather U-2 over Soviet territory had occurred; we don't know to this day whether this was really accidental, but it certainly wasn't Presidentially authorized. Was it really only on the US side that such things might occur? The hawks, the Nitzes might say "Yes," but McNamara's own worry about the Soviet missileman showed he did not agree. So why did the question not occur to him, or others? Not even in the form of a doubt, a possibility: which might have led to a query, privately, by RFK: of which there is no indication.

I pointed out to Blight that this lack of speculation, by a group of officials probably more given to generating hypotheses than any other before or since, at this point in the crisis does

not confirm his general thesis that the stress and fear in an intense nuclear crisis is entirely functional and adaptive, unlike the non-nuclear crises studied by Lebow and others. At the height of the crisis, this group produced one unquestioned hypothesis, a wrong one, and drew from it the most dangerous possible inference.

The major revelation of the Oct. 27 transcript is that JFK (contrary to the implication of RFK's account: not surprisingly) wanted to accept the Saturday morning Kremlin proposal, the trade of missiles in Cuba and Turkey. Blight puts it, "He had to be held down, by others: NATO would fall apart, etc."

And of course, some felt that there was no need to pay this cost; K was sure to back down. Though: before Castro hit our low-level recon planes, scheduled for Sunday? (No) After we had hit SAMS? After we had hit missiles, invaded Cuba? Apparently.

Blight says, "Everyone assumed that we would hit SAMS if one more plane was hit." That is presumably the meaning of the mention in RFK's account, that for him and the President Saturday night, after talking to Dobrynin, "The expectation was a military confrontation on Tuesday and possibly tomorrow." (He doesn't mention, as he did to me, the warning that if another recon plane was hit, there would be an immediate strike. He probably left this out because he thought it was self-evident, or of minor importance. Ironically, since it was this part of the message which K probably found most alarming, and to which he responded by pulling out!)

JFK, then, was ready to settle: on terms that his advisors thought--probably correctly! (anyway, which doesn't prove correctness, it was what I thought myself at the time) would radically weaken our NATO alliance and convert a potential victory (as I thought, and expected, especially after the Friday night message from Khrushchev) into a defeat, a backdown under pressure.

His own response to his actual fears of general war was, after all, coherent. Keeping our missiles in Turkey for a few extra months, depriving the Soviets of the recognition of strategic parity (as he had granted at Vienna in nuclear terms: wrongly, in terms of numbers, but perhaps not as he saw it) and its fruits, symmetric "rights" of "security" in neighboring territory: all this was worth a lot, but not worth a 1/3--1/2 probability of general nuclear war.

McNamara, it seems, had already indicated willingness to make such a trade. There is a memo by Len Meeker, from an earlier day in the crisis, quoting McNamara as saying that he saw no way of getting the missiles out of Cuba (non-violently?) without giving up the missiles in Turkey, "and we would probably have to give up Guantanamo too." (This was the minimum condition that Castro would

have found acceptable, he told Szulc). As I recall Nitze's notes of the early discussions, Stevenson's heretical suggestion that Guantanamo might have to go was shared by Rusk.

By Saturday night, Rusk indicated in his letter to Blight, he certainly agreed with the President's willingness to trade the Turkish missiles publicly. In fact, he could not recall which of them made the suggestion to the other, before the President gave him the instruction. Rusk called Andrew Cordier at the UN and told him to await another call from Rusk, which would be a signal from the President. If Khrushchev did not promptly acquiesce in the President's 27 October letter (which did not mention Turkey: though Khrushchev could anticipate, from RFK's private message to Dobrynin, that if he agreed, the missiles would be removed soon from Turkey, unless he claimed credit for winning a quid pro quo) then Cordier would be called to ask U Thant to ask both sides to give up their missiles in Cuba and Turkey.

He could tell U Thant that such a proposal would be met affirmatively by the US. (Without that assurance, I would suppose, U Thant would have been unlikely to agree to make such a proposal publicly: and be subject to denunciation for siding with the Soviets and undercutting the US).

Rusk did not know whether anyone knew of this "channel" or proposal except himself, the President and Cordier. Why was he telling it now? He said he was not going to live forever (he had just had a stroke, which prevented him from coming to the March meeting). He did not want the responsibility of taking this piece of information to the grave with him. (Cordier was dead, along with the President). He wasn't sure what its significance was--since it was never delivered to U Thant--but it didn't seem right that no one would have the opportunity to reflect on this. (Why he didn't tell it earlier is obvious enough).

What it means, of course, is that RFK's ultimatum to Khrushchev was not, after all, JFK's last intended word. Of course, his message to Cordier via Rusk did not commit him to carry out this course. It would, in fact, have been hard to carry it out before being challenged to hit the SAMS, if Castro worked at shooting AA at the low-flying planes. QUESTIONS: Did JFK know that Castro controlled the AA? Hadn't Castro already fired on low-level planes on Saturday? Weren't low-level flights scheduled for Sunday morning? (Or possibly, had he ordered them withheld, at least till the afternoon?) He would have had to wait at least till noon or later to give Khrushchev a chance to answer his message; RFK told Dobrynin that they must have an answer "by tomorrow." There would have been no point in preempting a possible acceptance by U Thant's premature proposal. But then, could he really signal U Thant to use this approach after another plane had been hit? Could he do it after an American air strike on the SAMS? Would he really authorise a strike on the SAMS without a simultaneous attack on the MRBMS--as he had indicated to Dobrynin?

Probably he did imagine, or hope, that this approach could still be used after another plane had been shot down. Otherwise, he must just have crossed his fingers that Castro would not succeed in shooting down a plane before it was time--in the absence of a Khrushchev reply--to signal U Thant. Perhaps he would have signalled Cordier as soon as he learned that Castro (or someone) was firing on the low-level planes. Yet I suspect strongly that if Castro had really shot another plane, the JCS and civilian hawks would have deterred him from trying the U Thant approach at all; or from responding affirmatively to U Thant even if the proposal were made. In theory, he could have gone this route even after an airstrike on the SAMS (even though he assumed that this would cause Russian casualties) and the AA, if he had not yet struck the missiles: but this seems even more fanciful.

Thus, realistically--which JFK may, or may not, have appreciated--this approach depended on no US planes being hit Sunday morning, or early afternoon. And that wasn't a very good bet. JFK knew it was a risk, but after RFK's warning, he probably thought that Khrushchev could assure, almost certainly, that there would be no such provocation on Sunday (unless he wanted war).

Actually, Castro told Szulc that he had deployed all available AA on Saturday, 27 October: "I submitted to the Soviets that we could not permit the low-level flights and we were going to use the batteries. We installed all these batteries around all the SAM bases and around all the missiles, and that day we issued the order to fire. It was we who gave the orders to fire against the low-level flights." (p. 584)

"On the morning of October 27, Castro said, 'a couple of planes, or several couples of planes, appeared in low-level flight over different places, and our batteries began to fire.' Official U.S. records confirm that on that morning two low-flying reconnaissance aircraft were fired upon, but not hit, around 10 A.M., when the U-2 was shot down by a SA-2 rocket. Castro said that 'the inexperience of our artillerymen, who had recently learned to operate these pieces, probably made them miss as they fired on the low-flying aircraft.'" As for Sunday, "I am absolutely certain that if the low-level flights had been resumed, we would have shot down one, two, or three of these planes...with so many batteries firing, we would have shot down some planes.'" (p.585).

It would be interesting to see Szulc's whole transcript for this passage (the deletions above are in the text). Castro deceives Szulc on who shot down the U-2--he says the Russians did it, "it is still a mystery" to him why, or how it happened (he suggests that it could have been an unauthorized action! "I don't know whether the Soviet battery chief caught the spirit of our artillerymen and fired, too, or whether he received an order...This is a question that we do not know ourselves, and we didn't want to ask much about this problem." (584). And he gives

Szulc a misleading or false picture of the later firing on low-level flights after the crisis had been resolved, failing to mention that a second plane was actually downed.

Did JFK know that the AA was under the control of Castro, and that Khrushchev was effectively powerless to stop it from firing, despite RFK's ultimatum? If not, the situation is about the same with respect to the risk from the AA as from the shooting of the U-2. If so, the questions above apply. Rusk might be able to throw some light on this. McNamara would presumably know, or could find out, about the assumptions on the AA.

In any case, Rusk's revelation means that if Khrushchev had just held out another few hours--simply did not answer--he would have won. Or might have won: unless Kennedy changed his mind. And those who knew this--perhaps only Rusk, JFK (surely RFK) and Cordier--presumably expected it to go this way. But Kennedy did not implement this approach Saturday night (instead of the RFK warning/ultimatum), by telling Cordier to get in touch with U Thant at night, to make the proposal first thing in the morning (before any planes could get shot at. I keep mentioning this, but perhaps--from all the evidence we know--he wasn't really worrying about this at all, assuming the Khrushchev could control Castro's AA, and would refrain from any more SAM attacks, after RFK's warning).

He did not, after all the argument on Saturday with his advisors, give up his own belief that the Khrushchev proposal was better than an American strike on the missiles, or invasion. But he did give up the idea of accepting the proposal directly, on Saturday. (Nor did he try to "activate" U Thant on Saturday, during the day, as he could have done easily. It is not really clear how he could really have presented himself to responding in a statesmanlike manner to "U Thant's proposal" rather than to Khrushchev's, when the content would seem to be identical. And if planes had been fired on, or even hit, why would it seem less craven to accept the proposal coming from U Thant, after he had ignored it the day before?

True, he had not yet rejected it publicly; nor did most of the ExComm know of his private rejection through RFK. So perhaps he could imply that he was just running a day behind in his responses to Khrushchev: he was just getting around to the 27 October proposal on 28 October, having "accepted" the proposal of the 26th (really, the Fomin proposal) on the 27th.

Could it be that this was really behind the "Trollope play" of RFK all along? That Kennedy should "first" answer the Fomin/Khrushchev proposals of 26 October (hiding the Fomin channel

from McCone and the ExComm behind the 26th letter); accompany this with an ultimatum, to give it a better chance. But then, if that didn't work, as it probably wouldn't, answer the second letter, accepting it. This not only gave the hawks a chance to "save

NATO" (though not, later, the Turkish missiles) and "win," but it gave JFK a somewhat better basis for overruling them on Sunday: their approach had been tried, and hadn't worked.

From this point of view, the reason that RFK's meeting with Dobrynin was kept secret from the ExComm was not just the private offer of the private removal of Turkish missiles; he would not want the hawks to know that he had made an ultimatum: they would hardly "let" him back down from it. (The statement, "This is not an ultimatum" was as important to make to his elite American audience--in case Khrushchev had alluded to it the next day--as to the Soviets, in hopes of getting their compliance. Assuming, as we now know from Rusk, it was a bluff; JFK intended, or at least contemplated and prepared, backing down from it rather than carrying it out.

But backing down from this private warning/ultimatum/bluff was one thing in the face of mere failure of Khrushchev to respond affirmatively. Backing down from the "subsidiary" precise threat to hit SAMS if another recon plane was hit would have seemed quite another, close to impossible.

Note the inevitable equivocality of a private warning, no matter how precise the deadline. Khrushchev could interpret the secrecy as making it easier for him to comply without maximum loss of face, without publicly caving in to a threat. That looks serious. (A public, sharply-worded ultimatum was more likely to look not so much like a threat as a simple precursor to attack, justifying it before world and domestic opinion.) But a warning could also be private--as, it now turns out, in this very case--in order to make it easier for the threatener to back out of it if it failed, without losing face for this in front of his public or his own officials and elites. In other words, Dobrynin would have been entitled to wonder--at least, in future crises, after he reads the Rusk letter--whether the privacy of the threat (as in many nuclear crises) is meant to keep the secret of it from high officials in the US government as well as from the US public (and from SU officials and public).

But even if he had wondered, and doubted to some extent, he could not afford to test this threat. He should have figured (and he acted as if he did) that even if Kennedy thought he was bluffing (as he apparently did!) Kennedy would probably discover that he had not been bluffing after all, when his planes were shot down. (The Bluff That Might Have Blown It.) And Khrushchev couldn't keep that from happening--except by starting to dismantle the missiles at first light in Cuba. Which is what he did.

Kennedy was ready to settle on Saturday morning; he understood that his own fear of nuclear war--wholly realistic and sane--was inconsistent with a willingness to accept a high risk of it for these stakes. And his estimate of the risks, so perplexing to the hawks (who felt vindicated in their own estimates, that the risks had been negligible, by the outcome) was more realistic than

he ever knew. Yet despite this, he let himself be overruled (privately, only for 18 hours or so) by his Cold Warrior advisors: even though the decision was his, and his sense of the risks, stakes and the incongruity of his official demands in the light of these was vivid.

That this could happen--that even a President with these realistic fears of nuclear war and ultimate willingness to accept even humiliation rather than initiate combat leading to it, was surrounded by such advisors and, predictably, deferred to them even temporarily--demonstrates the dangers of the nuclear era, now as then, even before weapons move into the hands of "madmen." The "reasonable" Russian Bolsheviks put their weapons near the hands of the world's then most famous "madman," who managed to put his hands on them.

The "liberal, dovish, weak" President (his instructions to Rusk could only have confirmed the worst suspicions of the JCS after the Bay of Pigs; if they had been followed, we would be referring to Cuba II as Bay of Pigs II, if not Bay of Pigs squared) chose, in his moment of greatest fear, to give an unprecedented ultimatum. And to postpone his abandonment of it for nearly a day, thinking he had that much time to change it before he lost control of events. Not knowing that he did not have 18 hours till then, control had already been lost by him: it was really up to Khrushchev or Castro.

Without the U2 shootdown, there would have been no ultimatum Saturday night. With the shootdown, but without the ultimatum, Khrushchev would have hung tough on Sunday: so the President believed. (He expected that even with the ultimatum). If a Soviet had shot down the U2, but the SAMs were firmly back in control, Khrushchev would probably have followed the President's expectations, rejected or delayed answering the President's letter and even his ultimatum, perhaps making counterthreats or moves: and (perhaps without ever having expected it) won. But as it was, Khrushchev realized he did not have hours to wait, if he was to avoid losing control to Castro's blind initiative. He could not wait and see if Kennedy was serious. He had to act immediately.